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EUROPE

Terrorist Cell May Have Sought to Attack the Vatican, Italian Officials Say

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO APRIL 24, 2015

ROME — An investigation into a Qaeda-linked terrorist cell in Sardinia may have thwarted a possible attack on the Vatican in 2010, an Italian prosecutor and police officials said on Friday.

Prosecutor Mauro Mura said at a news conference in Cagliari, Sardinia, that an investigation revealed that a Pakistani man who was in Rome in March 2010 was “described as a kamikaze.”

Intercepted conversations indicated that an attack was being studied, “perhaps even at Vatican City,” the prosecutor said, and that the Pakistani man had been described as being “destined to martyrdom.”

The attack never took place, possibly because members of the terrorist cell became aware that the police were on their trail, Mr. Mura said. “Our activity was indispensable to ensure that the irreparable did not happen,” he added.

The pope at the time, Benedict XVI, was not deemed by investigators a likely target. “Kamikaze, crowded place, these are the clues,” the prosecutor said.

Tens of thousands of people flock to St. Peter’s Square most Wednesdays and Sundays to hear the pope speak. St. Peter’s Basilica is also one of the most popular tourist destinations in the region.

“It appears it was a 2010 hypothesis that had no sequel,” the Italian news agency ANSA quoted the Rev. Federico Lombardi, a Vatican spokesman, as saying.

Mario Carta, an official with the antiterrorism police unit that led the

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investigation, said there was no proof of a plot against the Vatican, only strong suspicions based on wiretaps in which the suspects spoke of the pope, he told RAI news, the national broadcaster. “They spoke of a great jihad in Italy,” he said.

The revelations about the suspected plot against the Vatican emerged at a news conference in which Italian law enforcement officials announced that they were carrying out 18 arrest warrants against people suspected of membership in a terror network.

Nine foreigners — eight from Pakistan and one from Afghanistan — were taken into custody in several Italian cities on suspicion of murder, terrorism and human trafficking, the authorities said. The arrests were not in connection with the possible attack on the Vatican.

The authorities said that some of the suspects had engaged in numerous acts of terrorism in Pakistan, including a 2009 attack on a market that left more than 100 people dead, and that there were contacts between the network and Osama bin Laden.

Interior Minister Angelino Alfano praised the operation. “This shows that even today, Italy is able to combat this network,” he said.